



COVER SHEET

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Matthew Barney DR 9

The Romantic poet William Blake once said that the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. This aphorism often came to mind while slugging it out at the Dendy's Barney Fest - through Cremaster 1,2,3, 4 and 5 and then to the most recent installment, Drawing Restraint 9 (2005?). At the end of the sojourn it became pretty obvious that Barney's road of excess was inhabited by spectacular projections of aesthetic splendour, elaborate ritual, arcane quests, sticky biomorphism, and his self-appointed role as an art celebrity.

There is no doubt that spectacle and excess are the defining features of his practice. The title 'Drawing Restraint' however suggests otherwise, for it is meant to express a conflict or chiasmus between two states of being: drawing out and blocking in, resistance and creativity, liquidity and solidity, male/female, Barney's cremaster muscle ...you get the picture. As is typical of his filmic art DR 9 is self-consciously decadent and is draped with recurring symbols and abundant metaphorical clusters. Essentially, this film is about the transformation of Barney's Cremaster logo (which now seems to be his version of yin and yang). In DR 9 the logo is incarnated as a large outdoor sculpture called "The Field", and is erected on a Japanese whaling ship called the Nisshin Maru that sails on Nagasaki Bay. The sculpture is filled with liquid Vaseline, which over time solidifies into that icky, greasy stuff he likes to roll around in. After the Vaseline has congealed, the ship's crew remove the barriers holding it in place and the sculpture begins to disintegrate. This transformative process is just one symbol of the cyclic states of constraint and release that circulates in the film.

The opening scenes are evocative and beautifully crafted, and are helped along by an atmospheric soundtrack organised by pop celebrity Björk. These scenes include a Japanese paper crafter, a magnificent bamboo forest, and great aerial views of Nagasaki. DR 9 then cuts to images of men in overalls walking along a beach carrying sacks. This is interspersed with shots of a factory site where magnificently costumed dancers perform in a parade with a couple of floats (the floats may allude to his earlier film De Lama Lamina). The next scene shows workers pumping Vaseline into the field sculpture on the Nisshin Maru while the crew prepare the ship for departure. The well-drilled team of Japanese workers not only provides insight into that culture's dedication to precision (where even work is treated as an art form), but also into the mind-boggling scale of Barney's art.

The field sculpture is a central player in the DR 9 allegory as are the ritualistic activities of Barney and Björk who act as the "Guests". They separately board the ship, and after being welcomed, are bathed, groomed, primped, primed, pampered, costumed and otherwise indulged in by their carers. Their assistants dress them according to Shinto marriage customs and they proceed to a cabin to meet a tea master who organises a *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony). There are some lovely moments in this phase of the quest. In conventional Hollywood film we are bombarded with compressed narrative structures via rapid cuts of action, which do the thinking for us. Barney eschews this approach and instead demands that we adjust our focus to the elaboration of much slower temporal spans. This is why ceremonies are so significant in Barney's films, for the ritualistic tasks

they involve decelerate, extend and stylise human activities. We are thus extracted from our slapdash frozen TV dinner consciousness in order to confront alternative modes of being. The latter require the adoption of sensitivities of which the Japanese are only too aware.

After completing the *cha-no-yu* the wedding couple are left to their own devices. They embrace and then the room begins to fill with Vaseline. While this scene is unfolding Barney wheels in a lightning and thunderstorm that rages outside and is a metaphor for transformative nature, and the parallels between microcosmic and macrocosmic states. Back inside the ship, the copulating couple begin a new ritual in which they begin cutting off each other's flesh. They are soon severing limbs and begin to metamorphosise into whales. Björk clearly needs acting lessons and never really looks comfortable rigged up in her ceremonial gear. However, her musical compositions are complex and haunting, and by enlisting the talents of *sho* player Mayumi Miyata the authentic flavour of Japan is maintained as a guiding motif.

Another important symbol in DR 9 is a giant piece of ambergris. Ambergris is a fascinating substance that is used in perfumes. It is produced by Sperm whales and is the indigestible parts of their prey. Occasionally, the whale vomits it out. When ambergris is fresh, it's soft, black and stinks, but after drying in the sun it hardens and develops a pleasant aroma. This transmutation is perfect for Barney and his obsession with metamorphosis. Floating in the ocean like a giant turd, or even worse some bad student sculpture, it appears at various times in the film and is eventually caught and towed by a whaling ship. As a whale surrogate it is harpooned and hauled on board the ship by whalers who then pour sacred saki on it before hanging it out to dry. Once on board the Nisshin Maru, the ambergris is inserted into the field sculpture as the horizontal principle. After this procedure the sculpture is relieved of its strictures and begins to return to its natural state. In the final shots the ship sails towards Antarctica and two whales (Barney and Björk) swim away from the ship and head towards the open sea.

It's difficult not to be ambivalent about films like DR 9. On one level Barney is an awe-inspiring *maestro* of the contemporary Baroque and shows all of us struggling art punters that it *is* possible for an artist to garner an exorbitant amount of funding and create aesthetically lavish mega-products. His idiosyncratic art forms celebrate ritual, the hermetic, masculinity, visceral bodily functions, reproduction, the protean, transmogrification, and ...ah, Barney. It's that last bit that worries me. The guy should be given his due for maximising his artistic and economic connections. He also deserves to be a little self-congratulatory about it, but the trouble is, he is also very self-indulgent ... actually, he is positively self-obsessed and narcissistic about it.

Every *mise-en-scene* is a wonderfully crafted aesthetic object, and every scene a monumental installation. The sheer proliferation and abundance of Barney's creative visions are truly impressive. He is director, producer and main protagonist and generates work that encapsulates trends seen in the last decade of global art: inter-media, inter-disciplinarity, spectacular public art, video to filmic art, etc. Above all, his work is a manifestation of the contemporary Baroque (with some Surrealism thrown in) and that

style is characterised by excess, surfeit and opulence. Barney is an art celebrity, part of an international jet setting elite, just as Björk is a world music star. Celebrities are the new royalty of global capitalism and are paid extremely well for the privilege with incomes that dwarf many corporate CEOs.

One of the most enduring fictions about art is the idea that it's autonomous, that it is somehow removed from economic and political realities. Yet, there's something about Barney's seductive aesthetic mirages and his preening self-aggrandisement that reminds me of Neo-Liberalism and its global plundering. He seems somehow implicated in this rapaciousness as he spends money on grandiose projects, just like the Baroque elite used to throw around the wealth that Europe stole from the Americas. With this in mind it's hard not to see Barney's work as really nothing more than aesthetic obesity. Yet, if we put aside the overt narcissism in his work, and Barney's voracious feasting on beauty, there is a higher ideal in mind. No one has worked harder in recent times to produce the *Gesamtkunstwerke*, and he is a romanticist who offers us a perfect world, albeit one projected through the prism of surplus and his ego. In polarised and dangerous times this kind of escapism comes in handy, but you can't find wisdom in a house of illusions.